No. 3
A Motor Launch Raid on the Belgian Coast

By
A SEA SLUG,
British Service Name For Crews of Submarine Chasers.

PROLOGUE.

The author of this series of four articles is a young American, who has spent most of his time since the war started with the British patrol fleet, taking an important part in helping to organize that branch of the service known as the Sea Slugs.

He has accumulated a remarkable collection of anecdotes incident to this exciting branch of the service, and many of these were personal adventures in which he took part and which make one of the stirring narratives to come out of the war. He recently returned to the United States to assist the American navy in organizing the same branch of the service and should be of great value because of his experience abroad. So far as known, he is the only American to serve with the British patrol prior to the advent of the United States destroyer flotilla in British waters. Of course some of his experiences, of military value to the enemy, cannot be related. At the request of the service publication of his name is withheld.

IT is better that I do not mention the name of the Sea Slug who conceived the idea of a motor launch raid on the coast of Belgium—that part of the coast held by Germany, bor-

There Is No Moon. We Dash Along Full Speed Ahead.

dered by a maze of mines, girt by a moving belt of gunboats and patrol craft and freckled with a series of land batteries which make the experts say it would be mathematically impossible to smash into the naval bases from the sea side.

The British government prefers to keep his name secret for the present, so it would not be policy for me to divulge it. When he put the idea up to the commander of the base he said right away:

"I don't want to lose more than six boats. If you can get six crews to volunteer for the service go ahead. I won't order anybody on a raid like that."

Six times six crews volunteered, but only six were allowed to go. We chug-chugged out of Dover just before sundown, every man with a lifebelt strapped under his shoulders, petrol tanks filled to the last drop, ammunition in every available space and every motor thoroughly inspected down to the last screw.

We were thinking only of what a time we were going to give the Boches. The boys that wigwagged "Goodby" to us believed they had seen us for the last time, but wished they were with us just the same. Straight for a certain selected spot on the Belgian coast we laid our course, and when night fell we couldn't even see our own boats. There wasn't so much as a pin point of light showing on any of the craft. Every one wore dark uniforms, and every once in awhile when we'd crowd on a little more speed there would suddenly loom up right ahead the dark hull of the boat we were following and we'd almost be aboard her.

The men at the wheels had to have their nerve with them.

Over the Mine Fields.

The chap who had proposed the raid—we might as well call him Jones, which is not his name—had figured out the tide conditions to a nicety, and on this particular night we were having the fullest high water of the autumn. Just before we ran into the mine fields we passed a British monitor, about which I will have more to say later, and then began the real work of the expedition.

As every one knows, some mines are set so that they rise and fall with the tide and remain always a certain distance below the surface of the water, and if we didn't hit one of these it would be merely a matter of luck. There were thousands of mines all around us, and there was no earthly way of telling where any of them were.

As for the mines which are anchored always the same distance above the bottom of the sea, we were counting on the extra high tide to take us over these. At least Jones had figured that it would.

There is no moon. We dash along full speed ahead, for we must run in, accomplish our task and run out again before that tide ebbs enough to make it next to impossible for even our light draft craft to escape because of the anchored mines coming to the surface.

The men in each crew have been carefully selected. They are all in the best physical condition, good swimmers, and the Brass Hats (officers) have even made certain that none of them has a cold. A sneeze or a cough might betray us. Despite this, the damp, chilly night air makes one of the men in our boat sneeze suddenly. It sounds to us like the crash of a mine. I don't see why it didn't take the top of the fellow's head off. Our finely made motors, of course, were muffled until you could not distinguish their purr ten feet away.

"A thousand yards or so and we'll be across the fields," says the Brass Hat in our boat. He has it figured down pretty fine. Now we are skimming over a bar, where a heavier boat could not go.

Discover Enemy Destroyers.

We strain our eyes ahead to catch the white gleam of the wake of our leading craft and stare behind to make out the white bow wave of the one following us. It is the only way we can keep ourselves in line.

Presently I pick up out of the blackness of the night a patch of something that is even blacker. A ripple runs down my spine. The great moment has arrived. This is not like chasing a submarine which is trying to hide and which you can almost run circles around. It is more like six mosquitoes tackling a band of giants. If ever they can hit us a slap we will be crushed to jelly.

I point out the black patch to the Brass Hat. He strains through his night glasses, then hands them to me.

"Destroyer!" he says.

The term is well applied, and I realize for the first time what destructive power one of these slick sea fighters has. She is running without lights.

We wonder in whispers whether the other craft have sighted her. There is no way for us to signal them. The man standing at the wheel throws her over a little to starboard, following the white wake of the boat ahead of us.

"They see her," says the Brass Hat next. "They're circling in."

A glance astern shows us that our followers have observed the change in our course. I do not know how far we are from that destroyer. In the dark she looms so big that it seems we must be going to graze her.

There is a lurid stab of red in the darkness ahead—a deafening roar—the smell of battle is in our nostrils. The leader's three incher has barked. Ours barks at almost the same time. Ours has bitten, for we can see the flash of the explosion as the shell falls on board the destroyer. That is better luck than we had looked for.

The Searchlights Scour the Sea.

The flashes have shown us other craft—destroyers, patrol boats and gunboats. No hope of concealment now. We wait just long enough between shots to make it hard for the Germans to locate us from the flash of the guns. Our engines, with the mufflers open to give us all possible speed, are roaring almost as loudly as the cannon it seems.

The Boches must be confused. They haven't fired on us yet. Searchlights are darting everywhere across the water and in the sky. Their one object is to find and destroy us, but they cannot figure out what to look for. They of course think we have come in through the channel, and their powerful rays sweep the entrance to the harbor and the waters just inside, while others play over the surface from whence we fired our first shots. They don't expect craft of our size to attempt such a daring raid.

How much damage we have done we do not know, but we cease firing

The Gunner Fires Into the Source of the Light.

and double back, waiting until we are out of the zone from which we started to fight.

I do not suppose any of the Huns ever thought of the little motor launches. They seem jumpy in their nerves, judging by the way they handle the searchlights. Probably they think some new engine of warfare is attacking them, like the tanks which so surprised them in the trenches one fine day.

Umph! Suddenly I am blinded. I think for a hundredth of a second that I am shot, and my head is splitting. It is a searchlight, the rays full and square in my eyes. The gunner fires into the source of the light. It seems to be coming from a gunboat. If he hits her he will be lucky, for it is impossible for us to see anything.

We can hear the "woomph-woomph" of shells dropping into the water around us. We have made up our minds that it is all over, but two of the other boats, not being blinded by the searchlights, turn their fire on our tormentor. If the Germans hold on us we are gone, but they seem to be in a frenzy, and while they sweep round, trying to pick up the other craft, we change our course, and they do not seem able to find us again. They fire on every stick of driftage and spar that darkens the surface of the illuminated water.

Out Over the Dangers of the Mines.

When the rising sun began to streak the sky we were safe. Way off to port lay the monitor we had passed the night before, and the Brass Hat, in command of the expedition, signaled us to run over to her and take account.

The monitor was one of a type much in evidence during the first years of the war, mounting heavy guns forward in an armored turret. The guns were made in America, and most of the monitors were named after American generals.

They were used on work that took them constantly into the mine fields, and for that reason they must have special protection against mines and torpedoes. Just how this is accomplished I do not feel at liberty to tell, but because of it an amusing incident occurred. The first motor launch was running at rather low speed in toward the monitor, so as to come alongside. All of a sudden we saw her sort of climb out of the water, bow first, heel over and lie there as though she had run up on a bar.

A couple of "matloes" (sailors) on the deck of the monitor began swearing at the crew, and every man in the M. L. was thrown off his feet by the shock which stopped the boat. The swearing was not confined to the monitor's men. The M. L. had run high and dry on to the shelf which forms a part of the more or less intricate protection against torpedoes and mines that modern monitors carry. They had to use a crane to get her off.

Well, we had roll call and found only one man slightly hurt. A bit of shell had struck him in the shoulder. A piece the size of a man's palm was imbedded in the side of one of the M. L.'s. We had got off mighty lucky.

I might say here that later six other boats made the experiment again, and only one got back to England, so it isn't such a soft assignment. In that single craft were all the men from the five launches who had survived the hell they ran into. And there was plenty of room, for those who had been lost were many.

Under orders the survivors of that raid refrained from telling what actually happened, but in general it is true that the Germans must have realized what occurred on the first expedition, and they were ready. The element of surprise, which saved us all from going to kingdom come, was absent.

The officer in command of the one which was not destroyed cruised around in the glare of the searchlights until he had gathered in every living thing that still struggled in the water—a man's job in that searching glare of light and hail of shells.

The Hero.

"The sky was red over his head," said one of the men he picked up, "because of the vast number of illuminating bombs and rockets the Huns were using, besides the searchlights and the shells that were bursting. There was light enough to take a moving picture of the scene.

"Any human being would have run, but that chap's a devil or a god. He shouted orders to his men as though he were at maneuvers and fished us out of the water with a boat hook as coolly as if he were merely picking up a buoy and couldn't understand what all the racket was about.

"After he got me on board I saw him fall with the blood spurting from his leg. He grabbed a bit of rope, made a tourniquet himself, using the barrel of his revolver to twist it tight, and directed the work until he had all of us on board.

"How we ever penetrated that barrier of fire and lead and steel I don't know, but we came through and limped into port under our own power."

As I say, I was not on this expedition, and what few details other than those I heard I am not at liberty to tell.

Well, to go back to the monitor. We all went aboard and were given breakfast. In the ward room one of the officers told us some interesting things about their work.

"These tubs," he explained, referring to the monitors, "are not armored. We carry heavy guns forward, and the barbette is the only part of the craft that is protected by armor plate.

"All along the coast we have buoys anchored to mark fire positions. We cruise along, pick up one of the buoys and let go a few shots. Of course we know the range and where the German forts and batteries are, although we can't see them. Sometimes we have hydroplanes observing for us, so that we can tell whether we're on the target, but we have been doing it so long and we have the coast so well plotted and the buoys so carefully planted that it's mostly a matter of mathematics.

"It's all very impersonal. We drop a few shells into a harbor or fort, then move on to a new position and drop a few more.

"The Germans don't seem to have any planes along the coast here, and they aren't able to reply with any accuracy whatever, for they can't see us, as we always pick a day with a slight mist or haze or operate at night.

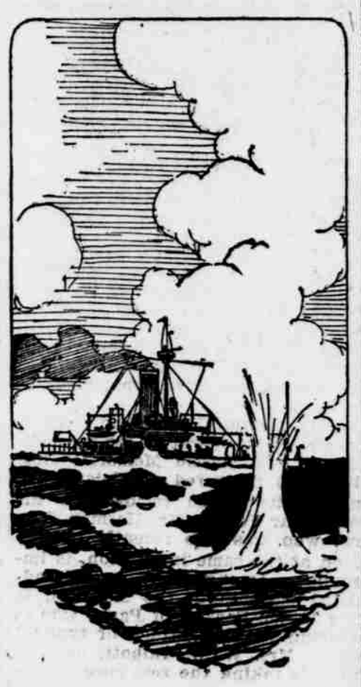
"But the other day we dropped down the coast for a little party, when all of a sudden, after our first shot, a shell plumped into the water just beyond us. We let go another, and the second German shell fell just a little short. Both were in line.

"We thought it was luck, so we moved to a new position. The same thing happened, only this time one shell came on board and did some damage and hurt some of our crew. Of course we thought the Huns must have some planes up giving the batteries our range, but we couldn't spot one anywhere. This sort of thing kept up all morning until it became positively uncanny. The day was heavy with fog, making aerial observation difficult.

How the Germans Got the Range.

"Then an officer who had been an observer in the Russo-Japanese war explained it. The Japanese had used a system at Port Arthur to locate some hidden Russian batteries that this chap said the Germans must be employing, and I guess he was right. In fact, we know now that he was. How we confirmed our original opinion I cannot tell.

"Every one familiar with the principles of artillery fire knows that a shell does not travel in a straight line. It travels in a curve called the trajectory. Elevate a gun of a given caliber to a certain angle and fire it and the trajectory will always be practically the



After Our First Shot a Shell Plumped Into the Water Just Beyond Us.

same. The curve varies constantly, becoming steeper as the velocity of the shell decreases and it begins to be affected more and more by gravity.

The Mathematics of It.

"Now, what the Germans had done was this. They erected a series of gauze screens—at least three—between us and a battery which we were accustomed to shell. To hit the target our shells must pass through these screens. Electrical timing devices indicated the length of time the projectile required to travel between the screens, and of course the distance was already known.

"This gave the Germans the velocity of the shell when it reached the screen. The holes it made in the screens gave them three or more points in the curve. This enabled them to plot a section of the curve. They could tell from the explosion the size of the shell approximately. This would enable them to know the velocity with which the shell would leave the gun.

"With these elements—a section of the trajectory, the velocity of the shell when it reached the screens and a knowledge of the initial velocity of a certain sized shell—they had more than enough data to figure out exactly where the projectile came from.

"In fact, they could check themselves on it, because they could plot the whole curve from the section they had with their knowledge of the velocity, and they could figure the straight distance from the velocity of the shell when it reached the screens and the velocity they knew it must have when it left the muzzle of the cannon on board the monitor.

"The best proof that the system worked was the fact that, no matter where we moved to, their shots straddled us, and besides the one which came on board us one of our other ships got a shell in the boiler room."

Well, somebody's always taking the joy out of life, as we say in America.

After mess we left the monitor, the little damage which had been done the M. L. that ran up on the shelf having been repaired. Before we went down over the rim of the horizon we saw our friend the monitor steaming as fast as she could go toward some vessels flying the Dutch flag.

"D— all neutrals anyway," said the Brass Hat. He didn't mean that there was anything particularly reprehensible in being neutral, but if there were no neutrals we'd always know who to fire on and who not to. The trouble is that a lot of ships are cruising around under neutral flags and scattering mines in their wake.

"We're always nervous when we're in waters a neutral has just traversed. Down at Dover— But I'm getting ahead of myself. I will tell about what happened at Dover in my next article.

The fourth and concluding article of this series will appear soon. It is entitled

No. 4.—The Dangers of Dover.

Aeroplanes bombard the barracks and town. German submarines laying mines in the harbor channel. What happened on a destroyer the day after I had dinner on her with the officers whom later I saw crushed and torn to death.

You never can tell Many a man has a checkered career who really isn't fond of checkers.

Truth may be stranger than fiction, but a lie is apt to travel faster.

Morality is always ready to monopolize the spotlight.